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ABSTRACT

The Language Proficiency Interview's structure, administration, and rating scale are outlined by an officer of the organization that designed it (Educational Testing Service), and some common mistakes made in its administration are listed. The need for training in the test's administration is emphasized. Its application in the corporate situation is discussed, and it is noted that because the test is not administered rapidly, initial screening for the test, as is currently done in Japan, may be appropriate. It is suggested that the advantages of administration without special equipment and the potential for effective assessment of communicative competence make the Language Proficiency Interview a useful instrument for candidates in corporations or language training centers requiring a rating of their speaking ability. (MSE)

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THE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW (LPI)

AND ITS APPLICABILITY IN CORPORATE LANGUAGE TRAINING SETTINGS

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TITLE: The Language Proficiency Interview (LPI) and its Applicability in Corporate Language Training Settings

Outline:

I. What is the Language Proficiency Interview?

II. How is the LPI administered?

III. What do the ratings (0 to 5) mean?

IV. Who can administer the LPI?

V. How is the LPI applied practically to the corporate situation?

I. What is the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI)?

The LPI is a face to face interview, requiring between twenty minutes and a half hour to administer. The purpose of the interview is to obtain a speech sample of the interviewee that can be reliably rated by trained raters. The LPI is not a test for proficiency in any specific language. Rather, it is a procedure that is applicable to any language, with certain limitations, depending upon the circumstances. These limitations apply more at the very highest level of language and are in large part theoretical when discussing language in the context of business.

The setting of the interview is neither formal nor casual. The environment in which the interview takes place should be fashioned to reduce interviewee anxiety without sacrificing an understanding that it is a serious exchange during which the candidate is expected to demonstrate to the maximum his or her oral language capabilities. The LPI should afford the candidate every opportunity to speak in as natural a context as possible, interacting linguistically with the interviewer on themes that are of some interest to the

candidate. While there is a general format to the interview, there is a wide range of subjects or content areas that can be accommodated within that format.

II. How is the LPI administered?

Once a candidate has been notified to appear for an interview and a location has been identified, the interviewer must ensure that the interview location meets certain standards. It must be neither too cold nor too hot. Care must be taken to guard against distractions such as ringing telephones, interrupting colleagues, clattering dishes, chattering tree frogs, motorcycles, buses, trains, airplanes, police or fire sirens, motorized canal boats, or other generally noisy intrusions.

All recording equipment must be set out and tested in advance of the arrival of the interview candidate, if the interview is to be recorded. It is recommended that out of fairness to the candidate, wherever possible recordings of interviews should be made. The uncertain interviewer can always listen to all or part of a tape to determine the adequacy of the speech sample and multiple ratings can be made to check for

accuracy. The latter approach is necessary particularly in situations where important decisions are to be made on the basis of the candidate's language level--salary adjustments, assignment abroad, promotions, etc.

Furniture in the interview area must be placed so as not to intimidate the interviewee. The interviewer must not sit behind a desk, for instance, and impose himself upon the interviwee. Chairs must not be too close, so as to avoid an invasion of the interviewee's space. Light or sun must not shine in the eyes of the interviewee. Furniture should be in good repair so as not to distract because of wobbling chairs and tables.

The interviewer is now ready for the interviewee to enter. As to whether there should be only a single interviewer or two interviewers will depend upon the level to be tested, the action to be taken on the results of the interview, and the resources available. For purposes of this paper, let us assume there is only one interviewer. The interviewer will either open the door and invite the interviewee to enter or stand when the interviewee enters or is shown in by a third party. To be standing indicates receptiveness and makes the

interviewee feel welcome. From the moment the door opens every action on the part of the interviewer should be calculated to reduce the candidate's anxiety and to encourage the candidate to speak. Sometimes it is not possible to make the interviewee feel completely at ease, but the sensitive interviewer can do much to alleviate the tension that is naturally present in the testing situation.

The interviewee is invited to be seated. If the interview is to be recorded, the interviewee is informed of the recording and is told how it is to be accomplished, whether by attaching lavaliere microphones to a lapel, a shirt or blouse collar or pocket, or by placing a microphone on a table in front of both parties. If a table micropohone is used, it must be able to pick up both voices. Unfortunately, table microphones also pick up a great many noises from outside the interview area, so care must be taken in their use.

The Phases Of The Interview

The LPI is conducted in four phases: warm-up, level check, probe, wind down.

Warm-up--the first phase of the LPI. It is during

the warm up that the interviewee is made to feel comfortable. He or she may be invited to have a cigarette, if appropriate, as for people who smoke the cigarette releases much tension. The interviewer, while engaging the interviewee in social niceties, is both putting the interviewee at ease and getting a general assessment of his or her language ability. By the time the interviewee is settled in, the interview is well underway and the interviewer has a fairly good idea of the direction in which the interview will go. Is the candidate barely able to utter the simplest response, much less carry on a conversation? Does the candidate speak with relative ease, albeit only with uncomplicated structures? Can the candidate express himself or herself with structural accuracy and precise vocabulary on any subject that comes up? Is the candidate indistinguishable from an educated native speaker of the language? These will be questions that the interviewer will want to answer during the course of the interview. The main purpose of the warm up was not to assign level. Problems that exhibit themselves during the warm up and do not again exhibit themselves during the course of the interview are not taken into

consideration when assigning a rating, since they are often attributable to anxiety rather than to lack of control of language. Indeed, under stress, even native speakers may commit gross errors.

Level Check--the second phase of the LPI. While during the warm up the interviewer listens for an indication of language level, during the level check the interviewer asks the interviewee to speak on matters and in ways that would qualify at a particular level, e.g. Level 1 or Level 2. The level check need not work through the entire range of levels, but rather should focus on the level at which the interviewer thinks the candidate qualifies. For instance, it is pointless to undertake level checks at 1.0 and 2.0 if the speaker is clearly at Level 3.0 or above. If the candidate responds successfully during initial conversation at a level, follow up questions are asked, all calculated to elicit speech at that level.

Probe--the third phase of the LPI. Every interview should have a minimum of three probes at levels that challenge the candidate's speech. The probe is the interviewer's attempt to take the interviewee to the next highest level. If, of course,

in the level check the candidate was successful, and if in the probe that followed the candidate was also successful, then the probe leads to further level checks at the next highest level. It is when the candidate is challenged that the probe serves its final purpose. If, in responding to a probe, a candidate demonstrates that he or she is unable to continue at that level, it is referred to as "breakdown," and the interviewer returns to the next previous level.

Following a return to the level check, once the candidate reestablishes the speech level, another probe is made at the next highest level. The interview continues, level check, probe, level check, probe, level check, probe, until the interviewer is satisfied that the speech sample is sufficient for rating.

Wind down--the final phase of the LPI. It is here that the interviewer once again asks the candidate simple questions, the purpose of which is to restore the candidate's confidence and to send him or her out of the interview with a good feeling about it. This is easier said than done if the interview has not gone well, but the effort should be made, nevertheless.

It should be clear from this brief discussion of

the conduct of the LPI that the interviewer must be sensitive not only to the language of the interviewee, but also to the content of the candidate's speech and how he or she responds affectively to the interviewer. The interviewer who approaches the interview with a preconceived notion of where the interview will lead, or who considers the interviewer as somebody other than an equal, is unlikely to establish the rapport necessary to obtain a ratable speech sample.

Some common mistakes of inexperienced interviewers are the following:

1. The interviewer does all the talking, preventing the interviewee from effectively demonstrating his or her level of speech.
2. The interviewer asks questions at too high or at too low a level, thereby failing to obtain a ratable speech sample.
3. The interviewer becomes absorbed in what the interviewee is saying and loses control of the interview.
4. The interview rambles, without direction; for lack of focus the interview produces an unratable speech sample.

5. The interviewer has a ready set of questions that he or she will pose to the interviewee, regardless of how the interviewee might respond to a previous question or statement.

6. Connections between lines of thought are not developed, transitions are weak or nonexistent. The interview becomes a series of disconnected questions.

7. Questions can be answered yes or no and interviewee lacks opportunity to speak.

8. The interviewer asks inappropriate questions, thereby offending the interviewee, rendering himself/herself ineffective as an interviewer.

9. The interviewer fails to test the recording equipment and consequently records nothing of the interview. At times these interviews have to be rescheduled, at great cost and inconvenience.

10. The interview is too short.

These, of course, are only some of the more common mistakes on the part of interviewers. The reader can be sure, given the variety and magnitude of error of

which humans are capable, that the creative but unthinking interviewer can not only avoid obtaining a ratable speech sample, but can destroy for all time the reputation of interview testing within a program, and in the worst case undo a student's resolve to learn a language.

III. What do LPI ratings (0 to 5) mean?

Level 0, in its most basic manifestation, corresponds to the candidate who has no capability whatsoever in the language being tested. Everybody is a zero in some language, even the erstwhile Mr. Peepers, played by Wally Cox on an early television show, who recognized an Etruscan text when it was shown to him because Etruscan was the only language he did not know.

A person can, of course, possess certain knowledge of a language and still fall within the Level 0 category. This is sometimes disconcerting to the beginning student because the expectations are that after study, one naturally begins to go up the scale.

At the other end of the scale is Level 5. Level 5 corresponds to the equivalent of the educated native

speaker of the language. The word "educated" is very important. When we listen to an educated person speak we hear different vocabulary, different structures, we discuss more abstract topics and we have expectations as to register. The less education a person has, the greater the allowance we make in conversing. That at Level 5 a person is required to speak the language of the educated relegates by birth and opportunity a large portion of any native speaker population to something of a never-never land along a parallel spectrum. This paper is not of sufficient depth to discuss what constitutes a true Level 5 speaker, especially since it is an issue that is never resolved to everybody's satisfaction. For business purposes, whether a person is at Level 4, 4+ or 5 is of little importance.

Plus Values: Levels 0 through 4 have plus values which indicate that the candidate is almost at the next highest level, but for some reason does not cross the threshold or, if the candidate does so, it is not done consistently. There are different ways to achieve a plus rating within a level, and for Levels 0,1, and 2 a person can be compensated for performing exceptionally well in certain of the pertinent categories: grammar,

vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and cultural-sociolinguistic factors.

There was a time when comprehension was included in this list. I am not entirely sure what became of comprehension, how it got lost in discussions of the interview and the rating scale, as nobody would deny its importance in communication. Because it is a passive skill, however, it is more difficult to test reliably than are the other categories, which are based on an active skill. For the interviewer to attempt to test comprehension by slurring his or her speech intentionally, by mumbling, accenting his speech, or using regionalisms, arcane or extremely low frequency vocabulary, would introduce questionable and extremely subjective material into an interview. From a technical point of view, that is not adviseable.

Definitions of Language Proficiency Levels

Level 0: Unable to function in the language.

Verbal production limited to occasional isolated words; little or no comprehension of even the most simplified and slowed speech; essentially no functional

communication in the course of the interview.

Level 1: Able to satisfy routine travel needs and minimum courtesy requirements.

Can ask and answer questions on highly familiar topics; within the scope of a very limited language experience, can understand simple questions and statements, allowing for slowed speech, repetition, or paraphrase; speaking vocabulary inadequate to express anything but the most elementary needs; errors in pronunciation and grammar are frequent, but can be understood by a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak the language. While elementary needs vary considerably from individual to individual, any person at Level 1 should be able to handle formulas of politeness, order a meal, ask for shelter or lodging, ask for and give simple directions, make purchases, and tell time.

Level 2: Able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements.

Can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations, including introductions and casual conversations about current events, and can deal with work, family, and autobiographical information;

language competence sufficient to handle limited work requirements, not involving linguistic complications or difficulties; can get the gist of most conversations on subjects requiring no specialized knowledge; has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to communicate simply with some circumlocution; accent, though often quite faulty, is intelligible; can usually handle elementary constructions accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.

Level 3: Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.

Can discuss particular interests and special fields of competence with reasonable ease; comprehension is quite complete for a normal rate of speech; vocabulary is broad enough that it is rarely necessary to grope for a word; accent may be obviously foreign; control of grammar good; errors virtually never interfere with understanding.

Level 4: Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs.

Can understand and participate in any conversation within the range of his or her experience with a high degree of fluency and precision of vocabulary; would rarely be taken for a native speaker but can respond appropriately even in unfamiliar situations; errors of pronunciation and grammar quite rare.

Level 5: Speaking proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.

Has complete fluency in the language such that his or her speech is fully accepted by educated native speakers as native in all of its aspects, including breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references.

At each level the interviewer approaches the interview from three directions: a) function, or linguistic tasks, such as narration or description, asking questions, or giving directions; b) context, the content of the discussion or the topic of the conversation; and c) accuracy, or the grammatical and lexual acceptability, quality and precision of the message conveyed.

The function, context, and accuracy requirements change as the interviewer moves from level to level. Consistency of performance influences not only the direction of the interview but ultimately the rating itself.

The novice interviewer/rater is often overwhelmed by the multiple facets of the interview. An important notion to keep in mind is that the LPI rating is global in nature. No single point makes or breaks the rating. The capable interviewer, during a 20 or 25 minute interview, in nearly every case can obtain a speech sample sufficient for accurate rating. Of course, the higher the level, the more difficult it is to interview, particularly for the lone interviewer.

IV. Who can administer the LPI?

While it can be said that anybody who has a background in language teaching or training would be able to administer the LPI, nobody should attempt to do so in a formal setting without undergoing training.

The training process is undertaken in a variety of settings by a number of entities. There is a joint government/private effort underway to make training

available. Involved in the program are the major government language training programs, private entities, such as Educational Testing Service, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and a number of colleges and universities around the country.

In the classroom or language training center setting teachers should always try to assess the level of their students. A familiarity with the LPI rating scale can provide a basis for that assessment, in a meaningful proficiency-based context that is approaching universal acceptance in academic and government circles in the U.S., as well as in certain locations abroad.

V. How is the LPI applied practically to the corporate situation?

The LPI, as a face to face interview, is by definition labor intensive. It proves to be very expensive if a corporation wants to test a lot of people. In terms of numbers, my experience has been that with low level interviewees perhaps as many as fifteen may be effectively tested in a day, but

certainly no more than that. If asked to make a recommendation, I would say that no more than ten candidates should be tested by any single interviewer during the course of a day and that interviewing be interspersed with other activity that would let the mind rest.

Given the expense involved in extensive interview testing, if a corporation wants to identify employees at a particular level, they might consider administering a screening device, in the form of a test of passive skills. Such a test would separate those employees who are clearly not at the level sought from those who are potentially at the level.

This two-phase approach to testing is what happens in the corporate context in Japan, where the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), a test developed by Educational Testing Service, is administered to the corporate population. Those candidates who achieve a specified score can apply to sit for an interview test and receive a certificate of rating. The pass level is one that corresponds to the 2+/3 threshold, the purpose being to identify personnel who are qualified at the minimum professional level.

The program in Japan is administered not by ETS but rather by the TOEIC Steering Committee, the local TOEIC representative. In Japan the TOEIC program also makes available to client corporations training for internal interviewers who interview language learners in corporate programs.

In Korea the TOEIC program is currently moving in the same direction, and we expect that ultimately, in a number of locations around the world, the LPI will be established as the standard for oral production. The advantages of the LPI as a testing procedure are that it is transportable, it does not require special equipment, an interview can be administered in thirty minutes, a person can become familiar with the rating scale and interview techniques during a 2-day workshop, and with trained and experienced interviewers the interrater reliability can be quite high. This last point is very important. If an interview program does not have clearly defined thresholds, the interrater reliability will be low. This happens when the defined thresholds are not intrinsic to the language learning process, as I believe the thresholds of the LPI to be, at least at levels 1, 2, and 3, or when levels are so

numerous as to overlap and thereby create uncertainty and confusion among raters.

A corporation or language training center would do well to consider the Language Proficiency Interview for candidates who require a rating of their speaking ability. The LPI tests communicative competence in as effective a way as can be imparted. And while it has its limitations, in the practical world of language learning, where the theoretical discussions of what constitutes communicative competence and whether it can be tested at all, people do not want problems, they want answers.